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Realistic Budgeting for Documentaries by David L. Brown.

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Crafting a realistic budget for your documentary is important to avoid a host of financial headaches, and to avoid presenting a red flag to funders. It is best achieved only after a detailed treatment (or script) is completed to enable a good estimate of the number of shooting days and locations required. The closer you, as producer, can come to a detailed shooting script (which then enables listing all elements of prep, production, and post) the more accurate your estimate of shooting days (and other line items) will be and the more realistic your budget will be. Since most documentary-makers don't develop a full script and shooting script before production, you will most likely need to develop the most detailed treatment possible that can be broken down into locations, interviewees, verite scenes, travel expenses and total shooting days. Then, you'll need to estimate the number of pre-production and post-production days, and research current rates for crew, gear and post-production facilities, and any other line items you're unsure about. You should most definitely be prepared to use a spreadsheet program like Excel.

Among the other initial questions to answer before beginning to budget are: film or video; and if video, what format? For this article, I'll assume that you're shooting in digital video (mini-DV or DVCAM—by far, the most popular [and sensible] formats for low-budget docs). If you're planning to shoot in Betacam, HD or 16mm, you're most likely very experienced with budgeting and documentary-making, and don't need much advice (or shouldn't). With a 20 to 1 shooting ratio (very low for most docs), a 16mm film budget could total at least twice that of a mini-DV budget (unless you own your own Eclair NPR, Nagra and flatbed). Film and processing can be budget busters.

To estimate post-production time, know that most hour-long documentaries (with paid pro editors) take about 14-20 weeks in editing after logging and transcribing. Some take a year, but no funder likes to see that in a budget. Most half-hour docs would take slightly over half as long, 8-11 weeks. But if you've shot 100 hours of video, it may take you four months to log and transcribe your footage. And it's extremely difficult to edit interviews without transcripts. To save money, transcribe only selects, but don't neglect to budget for transcribing. (pros get \$50/hr. and take 4 hrs. to transcribe one hour of interview. Thus, transcribing 10 hours of interviews = \$2,000) An intern willing to use your foot pedal transcribing machine is golden, even at \$10/hr.

The now quaint guidelines of \$2,000 per completed minute are obsolete by at least 50%, but most broadcast-quality hour-long docs with good production values seem to cost around \$150K to \$250K (although the range is much wider), when paying the crew (and yourself!) standard professional (documentary, not Hollywood feature) rates. Frontline docs cost around \$350,000 for about 26 days of shooting and 16 weeks of editing. Of course, if you own your own camcorder and Final Cut Pro system and you don't need a lot of crew, music, travel, graphics and archival material, you can complete an hour doc for much less, well under \$1,000 per completed minute.

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Jonathan Caouette claims to have made his acclaimed doc *Tarnation* for under \$300 on his iMovie, even though he later spend over \$100,000 on archival clearances. Even if he paid himself well for his time, it's still an incredibly low budget for a doc that received an international theatrical release. Let's assume, though, that you're not going to donate 3,000 hours of your time to the project, along with use of your edit system, even though too many of us do it.

You should budget for professional documentary rates, (and media funders expect them) knowing that you can and should negotiate the lowest discounted rates you can. For example, an experienced Director of Photography/ Camera person might normally get \$750 for 10 hours on commercial projects but asks \$500 for 10 on documentaries, and might be willing to work for a flat \$3,000 for ten days of shooting (if he or she likes you and your project), and might throw in a digital camcorder and some lights, flags and silks. You should shop around and try to negotiate multiple-day rates on camera, lighting, grip and sound gear and on all services.

Before drafting your first budget, it's very helpful to consult a pre-production checklist with every possible budget line item. You can find a good line item checklist in Simon and Wiese's book, *Film and Video Budgets* in the Film Arts Foundation library.

There are several acceptable formats for documentary budgets. ITVS has a good template that you can download from www.itvs.org. It separates "Staff" (Producer, Director, Writer, Associate Producer, but not Narrator) from "Crew" salaries. The other categories are: Pre-production/Research; Production, including Materials, Crew, Equipment, Location Expenses and Services; Post-Production, including Staff, Facilities and Services, Acquisitions/Rights/Talent (narrator), Masters and Dubs, and Administrative/Overhead; and Distribution (very important to include, perhaps 30-35% of your production budget).

Some higher end producers, including Wiese, recommend using "Above the Line" (Exec. Producer, Producer, Director, Writer, Narrator, Consultants) and "Below the Line" (everything else) format. I know very few who use this for doc budgets. I often use the ITVS model but, if there are no union benefits to consider, I include all personnel under "Personnel." Crew, gear and post rates will be different in Denver, Austin, New York and Peoria. Again, do your research on every line item, and for all rates for crew, gear, and services. Discuss length of day with crew, and have them sign deal memos that specify rate, overtime, and credits. Here are some ballpart rates (with a range from novice to Oscar-winner) for skilled and experienced Bay Area crew, along with gear and services.

Executive Producer: \$400-500 per day, usually for just a few days, if needed at all.

Producer: \$150-400/day, \$600-2,000/wk depending on experience.

Director: about the same rates as producer. DGA rates could apply for a guild director. If you're Producer/ Director, budget for paying yourself \$600-1,500/ week, depending on your experience.

Writer: \$40-50/hr., \$300-400/day.

Associate Producer: \$150-200/day, \$750-1,000/ wk.

Consultants: \$200-500/day depending on their expertise. \$75/hr. a reasonable average.

Director of Photography/ camera person: \$350-500/10 hr. day, without camera.

Sound recordist: \$350-400/ 10 hr. day without gear. Audio gear rental (mixer, mics, cables, stands) will be around \$75/day depending on number of wireless mics (\$75/day each). Boom person: same or \$50 less than recordist

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Production Manager: \$350-450/ day.

Location Manager: \$350-450/ 10 hr. day plus expenses, mileage.

Gaffer/Key Grip: \$350-450/ 10 hr. day.

Utility person: \$200-250/ 10 hr. day

Production assistant/ craft service: \$100-175/ day.

Assistant editor: \$18-22/hr.

Editor: \$350-450/8 hr. day; 1,800- 2,200 wk.

Narrator: \$350-400 for 2 hr. session. Well-known actors may ask \$1,000 or more, but often they work pro-bono for projects they support (with permission of their union, usually AFTRA).

Small (1 ton) grip truck w/ doc grip and lighting package: \$200-250. Doc grip and lighting package without truck: \$75-100. 3-Tota or Omni kit: \$40

DVCAM or Mini-DV camcorder package w/ tripod: \$150-250.

Betacam package w/ tripod: \$400-600/ day.

Videotape stock (DVCAM or Mini-DV): Estimate your shooting ratio first. 30 to 1 is a low average for non-verite docs. Surfing for Life was 50 to 1. Stock: \$6-\$15 per hour. Window dubbing: \$25-27/ hr. You might shoot 2-3 hours a day to get 5-6 useable minutes of footage.

Final Cut Pro, Media 100 and Avid editing system rental: Allow \$1,000-1,600/ wk. for longer than an 8-week rental, knowing you can buy your own for the cost of a month rental, but never budget for equipment purchase! If you purchase, you rent it to the project at going rates, and you do not report a purchase as an expense to a funder.

For union personnel (IATSE, SAG, AFTRA), you should budget for pension and health (P&H) benefits at 18%. Most docs don't deal with union benefits, but you will often want to include them for budgets submitted to CPB, NEA, NEH and union-affiliated funders. If in doubt, contact the union for rates. Usually, its wise to budget 10% overtime for union personnel or any crew on a 10 hour day..

Other line items to remember:

Any special gear such as water housings, dollies (wheel chairs), jibs, Tyler mounts.

Travel, lodging, auto rental, crew meals, overtime, excess baggage (contact the airlines P.R. dept. a month before your flight to request an excess baggage waiver—\$50 per bag adds up). Travel days for crew are usually paid at half the day rate.

Music. A good, experienced composer might receive \$6,000 to \$8,000 for scoring an hour doc. Using musicians rather than synthesizers adds to the cost. Copyrighted music is very expensive: licensing Surfing Safari cost me \$3,500. Pre-recorded library music ("needle drops"—through audio post houses) are surprising good and inexpensive (\$200-300 per cue depending on rights, plus research and dubbing fees).

Archival footage: If not public domain (eg. National Archive), average \$20-45/sec. or \$1,200-2,500/ min. and higher, depending on rights. Archival researcher: \$300-350/day. Music and archival clearance person. \$200-250/day.

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Sound sweetening, mix: \$150-175/hr., average about \$1,500-3,000 for hour docs.

On-line editing/ color correction. \$200-275/hr. With the blurring of off-line and on-line, budget conscious docmakers now use high end facilities only for severe color correction, or to master to Digital Betacam, not for on-lining every shot. Now, it's usually 4-5 hours instead of 35 at a facility like Video Arts.

Graphics: budget perhaps \$1,500-2,000 per minute for fairly basic graphics, animated logos and maps, etc.

Office/Admin/Overhead—office, telephone, xerox, shipping (avoid overnight if possible. Fed Ex bills can mount and hurt you badly) Budget about 15% of total.

Insurance, including Errors and Omissions coverage. Budget \$4,000 for a producers annual package that will include liability.

Accounting. Add 5-10% for many projects.

Legal. If you're doing contracts or other non-standard legal documents, or trying for "Fair Use." Richard Lee, the FAF attorney, has discounted rates for members. Perhaps \$450-\$1,500.

Fiscal sponsor fees: usually 7.5% added to the final budget total.

In-kind. Discounts or donations of anything from gear to crew to photocopying count as "In-kind contributions," and can be listed in a separate column. They are usually treated as funds raised.

Contingency: Most funders do not understand the concept, so build in about 10% throughout the budget, rather than a separate line item.

Build in an Income section divided into "Actual to-Date" and "Projected." The total income should equal your budget total with Distribution. Your categories might be Foundations, Corporations, Individual Donors, Special Fundraising Events. You might include your own funds spent under "Miscellaneous Individual Donations."

To summarize, the keys to a realistic documentary budget are: a detailed treatment to closely estimate number of shooting days and locations; a checklist to help you include every relevant line item; and research to identify appropriate rates for local crew, gear and services. Then, build in contingency and negotiate everything. Also, consulting with experienced docmakers can help make your budget more realistic, and your proposal more fundable.

David L. Brown has been producing and directing documentaries since 1971. His recent work included Seniors for Peace and Surfing for Life. He teaches Documentary Filmmaking at CCSF and UC Berkeley Extension, and History of Documentary at Film Arts. His website is <http://www.dlbfilms.com/>